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Approaching Bovinity; Life, death and the existential understanding that comes from eating dry-aged beef

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Body

Here's what happens when you die: you draw your last breath and a gust of oxygen escapes your body; your brain activity spikes, then settles, then stops altogether; calcium collects in the muscles, resulting in the stiffening of rigor mortis; your body temperature drops and your flesh draws tighter around your musculature; chances are you'll soil yourself; your cell membranes dissolve, releasing enzymes, globular ringlets resembling tightly corkscrewed curly fries, which set about devouring your cells from the inside-out, as your organs fail, your skin is marbled purple from pools of clotted blood, and you emanate the reek of putrefaction.

And then bugs eat you. All of this occurs without your knowledge or reckoning, for well before the skin-tightening or savage feast of cellular self-cannibalization, you have been banished into oblivion, your consciousness drained, your human soul (if you believe in that type of thing) delivered to another spiritual plane, or otherwise obviated altogether. Such is our fate; true across nations and cultures and broad expanses of history. It's a humbling certainty that grounds us in our place in the animal kingdom - whether hominid, feline, vulpine ... or bovine.

Of the consciousness and eternal resting place of a cow, one can only speculate. But physiologically at least, the process is much the same. And as with humans - who are, in the vainer cultures, shot through with embalming fluid, sewn up, patted with heavy concealer, attired in their loveliest earthly fineries and fit into heavy wooden boxes - cattle can be literally preserved in death. Not as calfskin rugs or fertilizer or bone china tableware, but as sumptuous, deeply flavourful beef. Through the process of dry-aging, the nasty pageant of death can be controlled, even mastered.

Dry-aged steaks are not especially novel. In the 19th century, it was common to store mutton or beef joints at room temperature for extended periods until, as the eminent Harold McGee describes in his encyclopedic *On Food And Cooking*, "the outside was literally rotten." Hanging huge sides of beef in enormous coolers (think *Rocky*) for a few weeks used to pass as standard practice, until newfound efficiencies in slaughter and vacuum packing led to animals being killed, dismembered and trucked to supermarkets in record times. The ritual of pruning a layer of weird moulds and yeasts from the surface of an aged beefsteak was swapped, in time, by the cruder routine of slicing open a Cryovac® bag.

As meat prices increase, and more chefs search for ways to buffer their bottom line, dry-aged steaks have emerged as highend eating par excellence, offering quality and taste befitting the jacked-up price, accounting for the increased prominence of dry-aged cuts on menus outside of higher-end chophouses and meat temples. More butchers and wholesalers are aging their beef "in-house," providing options to eateries lacking their own onsite aging facilities. Pat LaFrieda Meat Purveyors in New Jersey, which provides high-end beef to many of America's best kitchens, now regularly ages its beef to 120 days - more than fourtimes that of the 28-day industry standard.

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This ritual of controlled rot - a process French chefs of the day called mortification - produces more flavourful cuts, as cathepsins and calpains (those enzymes unleashed by the process of cell death) lay siege to tough muscle fibres, collagens, and connective tissues. The draining of the beef's natural moisture during dry-aging results in an even deeper concentration of flavour. Aged for so long, the flavours of the beef deepen to the point of mutating entirely.

Chef John Tesar, whose steakhouse in Dallas offers a 240-day rib-eye, deploys the word umami - referring to the so-called "fifth taste" after saltiness, sweetness, sourness and bitterness - to describe the intensity of dry-aged beef: "Imagine the flavour of good beef, and then concentrate it exponentially while adding secondary and tertiary flavours of truffles, popcorn, mushrooms, soy, blue cheese - basically the headiest, richest, deepest sensations of narcotized umami possible." It's a rundown tantalizing enough to get any serious meat-eater drooling, eyes rolled back, tongue lolling out of their head, Homer Simpson-style, moaning, "Mmmm ... narcotized umami."

But it's about more than mere flavour. The appeal of dry-aged beef - and, perhaps, the very meaning of it - has as much to do with the drug-like addictiveness of its flavour as its subjugation to the controlled action of death. It's as much about narcotization as it is necroticization. It's about someone serving you a plate of preserved death while smiling politely and calling you "sir."

Despite subjecting all kinds of things humans consume to a process of fermentation or decay - wine, cheese, soy sauce, sauerkraut, kimchi, barrel-aged spirits and good old fashioned baby dill pickles - meat protein is typically held to a different standard. This is much to our own detriment.

The rise of the farm-to-table movement, and the increased preoccupation with "organic" and "higher welfare" foodstuffs, with grass-fed animals, free-range chickens, line-caught fish and other practices and procedures that present as different from the cruel business of factory farming, tend to regard freshness as an ultimate standard. The narrower the space between an animal's life obviously grazing in a field and the consumer's plate, the better. Dry-aging overturns this standard. It prizes death over life. The more those enzymes gnash away at connective tissues, the more controlled decomposition is achieved and the more compelling the steak's flavour profile.

Instead of valuing the animal's nearness to life, dry-aging values its distance from it. It creates not just a new process of meat preparation, but a whole new ideal.

The idea of death has been banished from the food cycle, despite being totally fundamental to it. Freshness has become such a ridiculous ideal that various proteins have acquired their own mascots that work to remind the carnivorous consumer not of butchered carcass, but of the living animal itself, at ease in its preslaughter context, oblivious and as-yet un-dismembered.

Think of that stock icon of BBQ sauce labels: a smiling cartoon cow or pig serving up a plate of its own ribs. It's an image that cements the authority of freshness as a metric of quality, while also alleviating any consumer guilt around meat-eating by depicting the animal as a willful, even cheery, participant in its own demise.

Such cartoonish aesthetics affect our assessment of various meat products on a more practical level. Take, for example, that deep red colour so prized in beef, and often regarded as a measure of its quality. It's the result of an oxygen-storing protein called myoglobin, the presence of which signals the animal's relative proximity to its former life as a living, breathing, grazing thing. After prolonged exposure to oxygen - as in the dryaging process - myoglobin loses its ability to bind oxygen, resulting in the draining of that cherry-red hue, which is often mistaken for blood.

Dry-aged steaks possess little of this rosy bloom. Their aesthetic dimensions are slightly more bewildering.

In their controlled, densely humid coolers, covered in a thin, whitish-grey mould that looks like birch bark, smelling nutty and faintly of tough parmesan, they seem otherworldly: like the butchered carcasses of some ancient, be-tentacled entity from an H.P. Lovecraft story.

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Indeed, Lovecraft, who equated the modest pleasures life affords with the world's rare ability to stir a sense of genuine wonder, may well have been writing a tasting note for mouldy, mortified animal carcasses when he praises the ecstasies of "the unexplored, the unexpected, the thing that is hidden and the changeless thing that lurks behind superficial mutability."

Some, no doubt, witness the festering of carcasses and are possessed not by wonder, but abject horror. Chef Danny McCallum, of Toronto's Jacob's & Co. steakhouse, which boasts one of the most exhaustive dry-aging programs on the continent, tells me that some customers prefer to be seated well away from the restaurant's museumlit dry-aging displays, so revolted are they by the same carefully matured steaks they presumably came there to consume. The restaurant's imposing walls of aged beef are valued at over \$200,000; the time and labour-intensitity of the aging process making it very much a luxury item.

And, try though I might, I'll likely never be able to disillusion myself of the charm of high-end steakhouses I can ill afford to eat at. Maybe it's the tastefully dim ambience, or the stiff drinks, or the permeating vibe conducive to besuited and manychinned power-brokers, or the tingly-warm blush of embarrassment that washes over me whenever someone non-condescendingly refers to me as "sir." Or maybe it's the food - pleasingly unfussy despite the price tag, untethered from the fickleness of food trends, unstuck in time.

Whatever it is, I count the 45-day dry-aged P.E.I. rib-eye I recently ordered at Jacob's - enjoyed alongside a hoary old steakhouse classic of asparagus and hollandaise and a glass of rye-and-bitters - as likely the most complexly tasty thing I've ever put in my mouth. Choose your superlative: it's sublime. Transcendent.

Tongue-lollingly delicious.

Or, to use a blunt Anthony Bourdainism, really, really, really good. It's the sort of meal that sets the umami receptors of the tongue and hardened shame/guilt centres of the lapsed Catholic's brain twitching madly.

It is the sort of meal after which one expects to be electrocuted (or guillotined, after the revolutionary partisans storm the stocks and cellars of the nation's high-end steakhouses). Which is to say: dry-aged beef is delicious.

Retaining little of the tenderness or reddish-pink brightness of a cut like prime rib, a 45-day rib-eye presents itself as intimidating: slightly withered and shoe leathery-looking, the slight marbling of fat darkened.

The disjoint between dry-aged beef's ostensible visual repugnance and its resulting flavour further elevates the luxuriance of its flavour: salty, irony, succulent, abounding in that fermented, intensely savoury taste of narcotized (and necrotized) umami. It's sort of like those asinine '90s teen comedies where the mousy dork would be remade as the prom queen, and everyone stands slackjawed and dumbstruck as she descends down suburban staircase, her beauty and desirability cast further in contrast against the previously held perceptions of the opposite.

It seems tautological, or even slightly stupid to say, but it is exceptionally beefy. It somehow tastes more like beef. It is the essence of beef, and beefiness.

Something else is distilled in that ezyme-y meat protein, too, lingering long after even the exquisite taste has faded back into the dim of memories of meals past. To enjoy a well-aged piece of beef is to revel in something of death itself. It conjures up a new ideal, life and death entwined. Death has not overtaken or replaced the meat. It has ripened inside of it, as it ripens inside us all, revealing its own peculiarities and particularities. And so dryaging turns its back on the tyranny of freshness, drawing the curious carnivore's palette exponentially deeper into the abyss - 45 days, 120 days, 240 days, 462 days. Mortification, fatality and the looming promise of oblivion assert themselves in the fore of the experience of eating - like avenging ghosts.

As the character of modern life becomes increasingly apocalyptic - nuclear antagonisms renewed with threats of "fire and fury," **eco-anxiety** related to the planet's structural failure (itself partway attributable to the environmental demands of factory farming), a more creeping, unnamable malaise that sets its claws into us and drags us deeper into misanthropy and unfeeling - such confrontations with death, however luxuriant and trifling, feel vital. "Life may be doomed," wrote French intellectual Georges Bataille, "but the continuity of existence is not."

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Such a downer sentiment proves inversely encouraging, promising that long after consciousness is annihilated, and our bodies curdle and rot, something else survives us, even if it's the nasty business of death itself.

Beneath the barky, mouldy, white-grey guise of a slab of dry-aged beef, the grandeur of death is arrested. Beyond the dryaged steak's markedly eldritch edifice lurks the rare opportunity to confront mortality, to re-entangle life and death, existence and its opposite. Such brief encounters sustain something of life's preciousness; a form of spiritual nourishment and existential luxuriance.

Because, what? You want to live forever? You think you get a medal for outlasting your life's liveability? You want deny the fact that death ripens inside us all, that there are nasty little enzymes stirring inside us at the cellular level, agitated, waiting to break out and run amok like whooping post-apocalyptic hooligans in a Mad Max movie? Death isn't the enemy of life, but it is its engine. Its fatal immanence sustains the spirit as food and drink and way-expensive steaks sustain our frail, physical forms. Dry-aging, by some bizarre miracle of mortification, brings all this to bear on the gluttonous palate, unfolding on the level of taste, that most transient sense. Life and death are drawn together in some improbable harmony, offering not just an undue amount of carnal pleasure but an instructive lesson in life and how to live it.

If we cannot banish our basest fears, we can, perhaps, learn to savour them. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2017 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Graphic

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